



Assessing and accelerating the EU progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2019

A briefing to inform the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) and the SDG Summit in New York (9 – 18 July and 24 – 25 September 2019)

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Executive summary

This briefing provides background information on the European Union's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in advance of the UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF) to be held at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in New York on 9 – 18 July 2019 and followed by the SDG Summit in September 2019. It follows a [similar briefing drafted for the Environment Committee of the European Parliament](#) in 2018.

It offers an overview of key issues at stake in the UN meetings and on progress made on implementation of the SDGs by the EU. It focuses in particular on those of the SDGs to be reviewed in depth at the Forum that are of particular significance to the environment (SDGs 13, 16).

In general, the EU seems to be making progress on its SDGs implementation, but it is important to acknowledge that an overall policy framework for SDG implementation and, consequently, a comprehensive framework for EU SDGs monitoring progress is lacking, affecting the robustness of the assessment.

Adopting an overarching EU strategy on SDGs would clearly help in setting EU-level targets for 2030 for all SDGs. This would further allow the EU SDG monitoring and reporting to move towards assessing the distance to targets rather than simple trends in progress towards general objectives, thereby better informing policy priorities.

The EU strategic Agenda for 2019-2024, agreed upon at the European Council on 20 June , states that the EU will 'lead the response to global challenges, by [...] promoting sustainable development and implementing the 2030 Agenda'. However, given the review of progress prior to the 2019 UN meetings, it is clear that further concrete commitments and, importantly, more tangible progress is needed to position the EU as the unchallenged global frontrunner in achieving the SDGs.

1 Context and key issues

The HLPF is the main UN platform on sustainable development and has a central role in overseeing the implementation of SDGs at the global level. The Forum was established in 2012 at the Rio+20 conference “The Future We Want”, as a successor to the Commission on Sustainable Development, which met annually since 1993. It holds annual meetings under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as well as a two-day meeting at the level of Heads of State and Government under the auspices of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) every four years. An HLPF meeting under the auspices of UNGA, known as the [SDG Summit](#), will therefore take place in September 2019 following the [annual HLPF meeting](#) in July.

The theme of the July 2019 HLPF meeting is “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”. Several goals will be subject to an in-depth review of progress in implementation : [quality education](#) (SDG4), [decent work and economic growth](#) (SDG8), [reduced inequalities](#) (SDG10), [climate action](#) (SDG13), [peace, justice, and strong institutions](#) (SDG16) and [partnerships for the goals](#) (SDG17), the latter being reviewed every year.

It is generally acknowledged that the goals being reviewed this year are among the most challenging to assess; and they were the most debated during the Agenda 2030 adoption process, particularly SDG10, SDG13 and SDG16.

The SDG Summit held in September is of particular significance, as the first UN SDG Summit since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in September 2015. Heads of State and Government will gather for two days at the UN headquarters in New York to review progress on all 17 SDGs, identify gaps in implementation and, at least in theory, accelerate action towards achieving the SDGs. The format and organisation of the HLPF will also be under review, notably the choice of focusing on a few SDGs each year, which is arguably in conflict with the fact that all SDGs are interlinked. This summit is intended to send a strong political signal on the international community’s commitment to the 2030 Agenda.¹

There is likely to be only one political declaration for the two summits, which will be issued at the September Summit. Conclusions from the July HLPF should thus be captured within that declaration.

The SDG Summit in September will immediately follow the September [Climate Summit](#) called by UN Secretary-General António Guterres with a view to bring together governments, the private sector, civil society, local authorities and relevant international organisations, to develop concrete climate solutions and accelerate global action. The EU will need to present an ambitious climate strategy, if it is to continue spearheading the ecological transition. Climate action (SDG13) might thus be put in the

¹ [Workshop for the 2019 VNR](#), Geneva, October 2018.

spotlight at the SDG Summit. More than that, this timeline might provide momentum for highlighting the interlinkages between the SDGs, notably the links between SDG13 and other goals.

2 Reporting on the SDGs: how is the EU in the spotlight in 2019?

2.1 Global reporting at the HLPF in July

In 2015, all 193 UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda. As part of the review process, parties are encouraged to conduct Voluntary National Reviews (VNR). Both developed and developing countries, as well as relevant UN entities, are encouraged to conduct these state-led reviews.

The aim of the VNR process is to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including both problems and successes, in order to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The VNRs are also intended to strengthen policies and institutions, as well as to mobilise multi-stakeholder support and partnerships. So far, 102 countries have presented their progress report, seven of them twice²; taking into account those that will present a VNR in 2019, 53 countries remain. Among those countries that will not have presented a VNR during the first review cycle are the United States and Russia, as well as Austria and Bulgaria, the only two EU Member States in that situation.

Among the 47 countries presenting their VNRs this July, two are EU Member States, the United Kingdom and Croatia. France, while having planned to conduct a second VNR in time for HLPF 2019³, is absent from the final list.

In addition to the VNRs, the July HLPF will be informed by the first ever [Global Sustainable Development Report 2019](#) (GSDR)⁴. The GSDR will be officially launched at the SDG Summit in September, with key findings presented already at the July HLPF.

2.2 EU reporting at the HLPF in July

The European Commission is expected to present the EU's internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda at an event⁵ at the July HLPF.

The EU reporting will be based on a number of key EU policy papers and assessments published earlier in 2019. These include the [Commission reflection paper](#) 'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030' and its annexes, the [Joint Synthesis report on the European Consensus on Development](#), the 2019 [Eurostat report](#), and the [2019 EU report on Policy Coherence for Development](#)⁶, all detailed below.

The Commission's [reflection paper](#) "Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030", published in January 2019, acts as an umbrella for the EU's reporting to the HLPF. It presents the challenges faced by the EU, the key enablers of an effective transition towards sustainability, and three possible scenarios for

² Togo is leading the VNR charts by having submitted a report three times.

³ See [IISD article](#) from 2018

⁴ The mandate for and general scope of GSDR was [agreed in 2016](#). The report is to be issued on a four-year basis by an independent group of experts to inform the HLPF under the auspices of the UNGA.

⁵ According to the Eurostat report (see Foreword). Not communicated at the time of the briefing's writing.

⁶ List from the [Council conclusions](#) "Towards an ever more sustainable Union by 2030" (2019)

integrating SDGs within EU policies. The reflection paper includes as an annex an assessment of the EU's performance on the SDGs, based on the 2018 Eurostat report.

This latter element, the [Eurostat report](#), is at the centre of the EU's reporting. The report uses the EU SDG indicator set, which was developed to monitor SDGs progress in the EU context and adopted in May 2017 by the European Statistical System Committee. The indicator set is reviewed regularly by various stakeholders, including Member States and NGOs. The [2019 edition](#) includes 99 indicators, each goal being covered by up to six indicators. Some of these indicators are multipurpose, meaning that they are used to monitor more than one goal. Progress towards quantitative EU targets is assessed for the 16 indicators for which such a target exists; if not, progress is assessed towards sustainable development (SD) objectives. In both cases, trends are assessed, rather than absolute achievement, on the basis of the past five and fifteen years. The EU SDG indicator set is partially distinct from the UN set; out of the 99 EU indicators, 55 are currently aligned with UN ones. Quantitative targets are specific to the EU whereas the EU SD objectives can overlap with UN objectives and are assessed based on an 'ad hoc value judgement'.

While the Eurostat report focuses mostly on internal progress within the EU, the [2019 Joint Synthesis report](#) of the EU and its Member States (MS) aims to provide an overview of the EU and its MS' efforts to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda globally in developing countries through development cooperation. The document, published in May 2019, is the first of its kind, but it is now planned to produce similar reports every four years in accordance with the 2017 European Consensus on Development.⁷

The last component of the reporting, the [2019 report on Policy Coherence for Development](#) (PCD) acts as an interface between internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It illustrates contributions by the EU and its Member States to support achievement of the SDGs in partner countries over the period 2015-2018. The report stems from the [new European Consensus on Development](#) (2017), which foresees that PCD is applied across all policies and all areas covered by the 2030 Agenda. The PCD report complements the Joint Synthesis Report mentioned above by assessing internal policies, such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Circular Economy Package, as well as external commitments.

⁷ [2019 Joint Synthesis report of the EU and its Member States](#)

3 Delivering SDGs: review of EU's overall progress

Although progress has been made with regards to a better mainstreaming of SDGs into all European policies, the EU is still lacking a comprehensive SDG strategy. This also hinders EU's ability to meaningfully assess progress made in delivering SDGs. The Finnish presidency that took office on July 1st has announced it would put the sustainability crisis at the heart of EU policymaking and is therefore likely to press for this agenda⁸. However, other pressing issues such as Brexit might interfere.

3.1 Eurostat reporting

The 2019 Commission reflection paper outlined three possible future scenarios, the first of which suggesting endorsing achievement of SDGs as the overarching strategic policy objective of the EU and its Member States. This [scenario has been welcomed – by IEEP](#) and many others – as the only way to deliver the 2030 Agenda in a timely manner, and was also favoured by the European Parliament in a [March 2019 resolution](#). However, it will be up to the next Commission and the new Parliament to decide on the final ambition and scope.

Nevertheless, the EU reported that it was making progress towards most of the SDGs. According to the [2019 Eurostat report](#), over the past five years the EU has made progress – from moderate to significant – on twelve of the goals, notably SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). However, as highlighted in the report, progress towards a goal doesn't necessarily mean the status of the goal is satisfactory, and there is still significant room for improvement.

EU progress towards SDG 13 (climate action) is assessed as neutral, as progress has been made in some areas, but negative developments have occurred in others.

Conversely, the EU has moved a little further away from meeting SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), due to largely stagnating trends in R&D expenditure and sustainable transport. Trends for SDGs 6 (clean water), 14 (life below water) and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) could not be calculated due to lack of sufficient data.

3.2 Independent assessments

In the global context, the existing information suggests that the EU Member States perform well on the SDGs overall relative to the rest of the world. The [Sustainable Development Report 2019](#) (SDR), developed annually by UN SDSN and Bertelsmann Stiftung, ranks thirteen of them in its top twenty (DK, SE, FI, FR, AT, DE, CZ, NL, EE, SI, UK, BE, IE) with Denmark, the world's leading country, scoring

⁸ See [Finland's Presidency of the EU Programme](#).

85.2 out of 100. The EU's lowest scoring Member State, Cyprus, is ranked 61 out of 162 countries, with a score of 70.1.

There is therefore still room for improvement, notably on the issue of spillover effects, which occur when an EU activity or policy has unintended consequences beyond its borders. For instance, European food consumption drives tropical deforestation in other regions. The SDR 2019 identifies three types of spillovers: environmental spillovers; spillover related to the economy, finance, and governance; and security spillovers. Most EU Member States score badly across these spillovers with Luxembourg ranking as the third-worst performer globally, behind Switzerland and Singapore. Among G20 countries, the EU as a whole represents the highest share of the global performance gap in spillovers, accounting for 26.5% of the global gap⁹. This is important to highlight, as spillover effects are not monitored in the Eurostat report, thereby representing a significant gap in the EU's SDGs monitoring. They are however acknowledged in the 2019 Eurostat report, which is a welcomed addition compared to previous editions.

3.3 Overview of key issues in EU reporting

A recent review of the EU reporting on SDGs and sustainability by the European Court of Auditors (ECA)¹⁰ found significant gaps in the EU reporting, notably on the overall understanding of the contribution of the EU budget and EU policy to achieving the SDGs, with the exception of the area of external action.

The ECA review also notes the lack of an EU strategy on SDGs for 2030, with such a strategy considered as a pre-requisite for meaningful sustainability reporting. The UN SDSN similarly flagged this issue as a main gap in the EU monitoring of SDGs in a [recent study](#), pointing out the lack of pre-defined 2030 targets as the greatest limitation of EU SDGs monitoring, as it means the Eurostat report cannot estimate distance to targets.

At the moment only 16 Eurostat indicators are associated to quantitative EU targets against which progress can be assessed. This is important to understand, as having quantified targets potentially allows an assessment of the distance to meeting the target, rather than simply identifying positive or negative trends. Moreover, all but two of the current EU quantitative targets are for 2020 – derived from the Europe 2020 strategy and Education and Training 2020 – which means that they do not allow for a clear estimate of whether the EU is on track to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Only one, 'Official development assistance as share of gross national income' (SDG 17), is aligned with the 2030 Agenda timeframe.

Other identified areas for improvement include the timing and transparency of the consultation process, the lack of gap analysis in the monitoring process, and the absence of disaggregated results

⁹ [Sustainable Development Report 2019](#)

¹⁰ ECA Rapid case review (June 2019) [Reporting on sustainability: A stocktake of EU Institutions and Agencies](#)

at Member State and subnational levels. The need to increase complementarity with UN indicators has also been highlighted¹¹.

4 Review of the in-depth focus SDGs: climate action (SDG 13)

The overall EU reporting on SDGs indicates mixed progress towards SDG13 with the 2019 Eurostat report assessing progress towards SDG13 as neutral. Other independent assessments of the EU's progress on SDG13 paint a more negative picture. The discrepancy between the different existing assessments of EU progress towards SDG13 shows the need for more representative, comprehensive and consensual data to monitor SDG13.

4.1 Eurostat reporting

The official UN definition for SDG13 is 'take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts'. The EU SDG dataset interprets this by defining three indicator categories to assess progress towards SDG13: climate mitigation, climate impacts, and support to climate action.

For the first time, due to improvements in data availability and changes in methodology, Eurostat was able to assess overall progress towards SDG 13. This resulted in an overall neutral assessment, with advances in some areas being offset by negative developments in others.

The EU SDG indicators for climate mitigation are greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, GHG emissions intensity of energy consumption, energy consumption (final and primary), share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption, and average CO₂ emissions per km from new passenger cars. Four of these five indicators were assessed against existing EU official and quantified targets. The short-term trends (past five years) for both GHG emissions related indicators yield to significant progress. However, in the same timeframe, progress has slowed down regarding the uptake of renewable energies and reduction of CO₂ emissions from cars. Furthermore, insufficient progress has been made against the EU's primary energy consumption target and the Union has also been moving slightly further away from its final energy consumption target.

The choice of indicators significantly impacts the results at a goal level. The EU reduced its GHG emission by 22.4% in 2016 compared to 1990, thereby exceeding its 2020 target of a 20% reduction. However, the recent European Environmental Agency (EEA) [Environmental Indicator Report](#) found deteriorating trends for greenhouse gas emissions from transport, judging it unlikely that the EU will

¹¹ European Commission, [Minutes of the subgroup meeting on "monitoring, assessing and reporting progress on the Sustainable Development Goals"](#) (March 2018).

meet its objective¹² by 2020. The transport related emissions are not, however, factored into the Eurostat monitoring therefore possibly leading to an overly positive interpretation of the situation.

Confirming further the EU's lack of sufficient progress in meeting renewable energy targets, the [recent Commission assessment](#) of Member states' draft National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) has found them falling short of meeting the EU's 2030 energy targets. The Commission has called on Member States to raise their ambitions, notably on renewables and energy efficiency contributions. This testifies to the problems associated with the EU's use of 2020 targets in its current reporting on SDG progress, rather than the later targets which would be more relevant to current and recent action.

Regarding [climate impacts](#), the EU is moving away from its objective on near-surface temperatures, with the decade from 2009 to 2018 having been the hottest on record in Europe. Progress is also insufficient on mean ocean acidity, the mean pH level of ocean water having reached an unprecedented low over pre-industrial levels in 2016. Trends in economic losses from weather and climate-related extremes, the last indicator, could not be assessed accurately, pointing out the necessity of improving EU monitoring of these losses.

As for [support to climate action](#), only one indicator was used in the 2019 Eurostat edition, namely the EU's contribution to the international 100 billion USD commitment on climate-related expenditure under the UNFCCC. While neither short nor long-term trend was assessed for this indicator, the EU contribution is reported to be increasing since 2014.

4.2 Other EU level assessments

The [2019 Policy Coherence for Development \(PCD\) report](#) assesses progress towards SDG 13 externally and internally. There is however no quantitative evaluation of progress, but rather a list of the EU actions falling under the 'tackling climate change' umbrella. The report points out the EU's adoption of climate targets for 2030 as an important step towards reaching a low carbon economy, as well as the Commission's call for a long-term vision for a climate neutral economy by 2050¹³. The proposal to increase the target for spending on climate from 20% to 25% of the EU budget in the 2021-2027 Multi-annual Financial Framework is also claimed as a proof of the EU's commitment to climate action.

The [2019 Joint Synthesis Report \(JSR\)](#) also simply catalogues policies and actions, but assesses each SDG separately, and focuses on external actions only. It complements rather than differs from the Eurostat report in that regard, as it also focuses on EU's external [support to climate action](#) by listing international bodies to which the EU is providing 'support'¹⁴. Support to climate adaptation is implied in the mention of the EU's support to the [Sendai Framework to promote Disaster Risk reduction](#), but not explicitly listed. As with the PCD report, the JSR report does not provide a quantitative assessment of progress, and does not mention any gaps in external EU policies for SDGs.

4.3 Independent assessments

The [Climate Action Tracker](#) and [Climate Transparency](#) have conducted an independent review of EU Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), assessing both the content of the NDCs and the current [climate mitigation](#) policies of reviewed countries. The latest assessment finds the current EU

¹² 'Reduce the overall environmental impact of production and consumption in the mobility sector', 7th EAP. From [EEA Environmental Indicator Report](#) (2018)

¹³ See EU Commission Communication '[A Clean Planet for All](#)' (2018). It is worth highlighting that the EU has not yet reached a consensus on the 2050 net-zero target.

¹⁴ 'support' is not defined in the report.

commitments insufficient, which means that if all government targets were in this range, warming would reach over 2°C and up to 3°C¹⁵.

Similar findings linked to climate mitigation arise from the PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency's newly released '[global stocktake](#)' tool on closing the emission gap between the Paris agreement and national policies. By 2050, GHG emissions in an 'EU NDC' scenario are projected to far exceed the level of emissions leading to a '2°C high probability' scenario, meaning a scenario that keeps global warming below 2°C with 66% probability¹⁶.

The global [Sustainable Development Report 2019](#)¹⁷ (SDR), which uses different indicators from the EU SDG dataset, is more positive in its assessment of EU progress towards SDG13, despite integrating spillovers into the assessment. Only four EU Member States (Finland, Cyprus, Slovakia, Luxembourg) score below 80 out of 100 for this goal, and ten score above 90.

However, this assessment might require further consideration as the indicators are heavily skewed towards climate mitigation. Three out of five indicators relate to CO₂ emissions: energy-related CO₂ emissions per capita; imported CO₂ emissions, technology-adjusted; and CO₂ emissions embodied in fossil fuel exports. A fourth one is the effective carbon rate from all non-road energy (excluding emissions from biomass), meaning the price of carbon emissions resulting from taxes and emissions trading systems. While those indicators include spillover effects, they do not capture all aspects of climate mitigation, such as other greenhouse gases emissions or the share of the renewable energy sector.

The last indicator, 'people affected by climate-related disaster', measures climate impacts. This can potentially be misleading; some countries that are geographically more vulnerable to climate change score high on this indicator while also scoring high on climate mitigation indicators. This indicator therefore measures vulnerability rather than performance.

As a consequence of the above factors, Poland and the Czech Republic end up scoring among the ten highest achieving EU Member States on SDG 13, despite of these countries known reliance on coal¹⁸.

The SDR 2019 is less positive on the EU's performance on SDG 13 when looking at the absolute performance gap¹⁹; the EU is assessed to be responsible for 9.1% of the global gap on SDG 13, its worst score after SDG 12 (17.3%). As this is in absolute terms, this is partly due to the EU's large population; if Europeans' CO₂ emissions per capita were to decrease, it would have a higher impact on the global CO₂ emissions level than if Argentinians' CO₂ emissions per capita were to decrease by the same amount. All the more so, it attests to the EU's significant responsibility in spearheading global climate action.

The OECD report [Measuring Distance to the SDG Targets 2019](#) assesses OECD countries' standing on SDGs achievement with references to targets closely aligned with the UN ones; it integrates spillovers. For SDG 13, three indicators are assessed: countries with legislative and/or regulatory provisions been made for managing disaster risk (adaptation), production-based CO₂ productivity (mitigation) and

¹⁵ See [EU assessment](#), Climate Action tracker, updated June 17 2019.

¹⁶ See PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (2019). [The global stocktake - Keeping track of implementing the Paris Agreement](#).

¹⁷ Produced by the [Sustainable Development Solutions Network](#) (SDSN) and [Bertelsmann Stiftung](#), it uses both indicators endorsed officially by the UN Statistical Commission and non-official indicators.

¹⁸ See International Energy Agency, [Coal 2018](#). Both Poland and the Czech Republic have recently [opposed the EU council's ambition of setting an EU-wide net-zero emission target by 2050](#).

¹⁹ The performance gap is the gap remaining to achieve each SDG globally. The SDR measures how much each country accounts for the global gap in meeting each SDG, in absolute terms. Mathematically, this means that the larger a country's population is, the larger its share of the performance gap is likely to be; India and China for instance each account for more than 10% of the global gap for most SDGs.

bilateral climate-related ODA (support to climate action). Remaining distance to SDG 13 targets differ significantly between EU countries, and 14 Member States score below the OECD average (e.g. Poland and the Czech Republic, see above).

5 Review of the in-depth focus SDGs: peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16)

SDG 16 captures general societal trends which are fundamentally linked to environmental concerns underpinning any progress made in that regard, including on SDG13. EU progress towards SDG16 can be assessed as moderate with the 2019 Eurostat report showing partial progress on SDG16 for the EU. Some discrepancies arise when comparing the EU monitoring to insights from other existing assessments, pointing to a number of shortcomings in EU reporting.

5.1 Eurostat reporting

The EU indicators for SDG16 cover three aspects: peace and personal security, access to justice, and trust in institutions. Trends at goal level could not be calculated by Eurostat due to insufficient data over the past five years; but progress was assessed at indicator level when possible. There is no quantified target at EU level for any of SDG16 indicators, meaning that progress was gauged towards sustainable development (SD) objectives.

On the first aspect, peace and personal security, there has been significant progress regarding ‘death rate due to homicide’ as well as ‘population reporting occurrence of crime, violence or vandalism in their area’; up-to-date data is lacking for the third indicator, ‘physical and sexual violence to women experienced within 12 months prior to the interview’.

On access to justice, there has been significant progress on ‘general government total expenditure on law courts’; up-to-date data is lacking for the second indicator, ‘perceived independence of the justice system’.

As for the last category, trust in institutions, up-to-date data is lacking for the first indicator, ‘corruption perceptions index’. While the long-term trend shows insufficient progress on the second indicator, ‘population with confidence in EU institutions’, the short-term trend shows significant progress towards sustainable development objectives. While the trend is indeed positive over the last five years, absolute values of the indicator (based on the [Eurobarometer](#), and covering the European Central Bank, the European Parliament, and the European Commission) in 2018 are all below their 1999 levels.

5.2 Other EU levels assessments

EU’s actions towards SDG16 are also listed in the [2019 Policy Coherence for Development \(PCD\) report](#), which focuses mainly on the peace and security dimension. The report mentions the EU’s support for democracy, human rights and good governance worldwide, through policy dialogues or financial

support. EU initiatives such as the [Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace](#) or the [Capacity building in support of security & development](#) are also highlighted as tools to support partner countries in improving their security systems. Finally, the report cites the EU's work on conflict prevention, highlighting political and financial efforts to improve resilience of external states and societies.

The [2019 Joint Synthesis Report](#) paints a similar picture of EU external support to peace, justice and strong institutions. The report mentions the increase in ODA spending on SDG16 in 2017 as compared to 2014 and lists numerous examples of EU and Member States external actions that have contributed to global progress on SDG16, on its three aspects.

5.3 Independent assessments

The global [Sustainable Development Report 2019](#) paints a slightly more negative picture of EU progress on SDG 16. Ten EU Member States score below 80, a worse result than for SDG13. This is partly because the global SDG report includes security spillovers through the indicator 'transfers of major conventional weapons (exports)'. While some indicators are similar to the EU report, focusing on peace (weapons transfers) and security (homicides, prison population, safety at night), others concentrate on efficient administration (government efficiency, property rights, birth registrations) rather than access to justice. The EU Member States tend to score poorly on indicators looking at major conventional weapons transfers, proportion of the population who feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where they live (highest performance being reached above 80%), and prison population per 100,000 people²⁰.

The SDR 2019 assesses the EU to be responsible for 3.5% of the global absolute performance gap on SDG 16, which is less than for most other SDGs.

The Institute for Economics and Peace [Global Peace Index](#) (2019) provides another source of monitoring relevant to SDG 16, although it focuses on peace and security only, covering three areas: safety and security, ongoing conflict, and militarisation. Europe²¹ is found to be the world's most peaceful region, and ten EU countries are amongst the world's 20 most peaceful countries.

The OECD '[Measuring Distance to the SDGs Targets 2019](#)' uses seven indicators for SDG 16: the share of population feeling safe when walking alone at night; unsentenced detainees as a proportion of overall prison population; external political efficacy, i.e. 'people's feelings that their views can impact the political processes'²²; the proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority; countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information; and the existence of independent national human rights institutions in compliance with the Paris principles. Two indicators, death from assault and the share of population having confidence in the government, are quite similar to those used by Eurostat. The report shows significant disparities between EU countries on SDG 16 targets, but with some general trends; while the safety target is often reached, there is a significant distance remaining for

²⁰ It is worth noting that most other countries in the world could not be assessed on this last indicator – the EU's poor performance might thus need to be put into perspective. Similarly, for the feeling of safety at night, most countries worldwide do not reach the 80% threshold.

²¹ Not the European Union

²² See [UNDP presentation on SDG Indicator 16.7.2](#) (March 2019)

targets relative to institutions. Overall, most EU countries score higher than the OECD average, with the exception of Italy and Estonia.

6 Conclusions and discussion

In general, the EU seems to be making progress on its SDGs implementation, but it is important to acknowledge that an overall policy framework for SDG implementation and, consequently, a comprehensive framework for EU SDGs monitoring progress is lacking, affecting the robustness of the assessment.

Adopting an overarching EU strategy on SDGs would clearly help in setting EU-level targets for 2030 for all SDGs. This would allow the Eurostat reporting to move towards assessing the distance to targets rather than simple trends in progress towards general objectives, thereby better informing policy priorities.

The lack of EU monitoring on its global spillover effects is also a significant omission leading to a range of impacts being disregarded, such as the carbon or biodiversity footprints of consumption sourced from outside the EU, and therefore resulting in an inaccurate estimate of progress in the global context. The acknowledgement of spillover effects' existence in the 2019 Eurostat report could, however, mean that this gap might be filled in the future.

While the Joint Synthesis report and the PCD report are valuable additions to the existing EU SDG assessment base, in their current form they simply list actions rather than attempting to monitor progress quantitatively.

There are some significant issues with the current EU monitoring of SDG13, highlighted by the discrepancies between the different reporting and assessment sources. It is also important to note that the EU monitoring and reporting framework for SDG13 currently has no dedicated targets or indicators related to climate adaptation.

The EU's own reporting on the EU's progress towards SDG 13 is mixed, while the other existing assessments paint a more negative picture overall. This might be explained partially by the fact that the EU monitoring does not consider spillover impacts, such as imported GHG emissions or imported deforestation. It is also due to the difference in the targets reported on: the EU reporting focuses on 2020 targets, which is not necessary an accurate indicator of current progress towards existing 2030 targets. As previously mentioned, while Eurostat reports moderate progress towards the EU 2020 target of 'Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption' (SDG 13)²³, the [Commission recently found](#) that Member States' current draft energy plans are not in line with the EU 2030

²³ Eurostat (2019)

renewable energy target. Clearly, reaching the 2020 targets is largely due to past policy decisions and economic trends, and does not mean that enough is currently being done to meet the 2030 Agenda.

‘Strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity’ is the first UN target for SDG 13²⁴. While the 2019 Eurostat report mentions the EU’s pursuit of ‘climate adaptation and resilience objectives’²⁵, there are no specific indicators measuring the EU’s progress in that respect. Similarly, adaptation is hardly touched upon in the EU’s Joint Synthesis and PCD reports. This lack of reporting on climate adaptation targets seems like a significant omission, as climate change is already negatively impacting Europe, thereby undermining progress towards many other SDGs.

The EU monitoring of SDG16 also suffers from some clear shortcomings. Although progress towards peace and security targets seem to be positive according to both EU and external monitoring, the EU scores less well in non-EU sources where spillovers are assessed. Furthermore, the level of data in the EU’s reporting on SDG16 is insufficient for several indicators, and no quantitative target exists for the goal, which means that assessment of progress is imprecise. Non-EU sources use several additional indicators of interest, which could be considered for integration by the EU.

SDG 16 underpins most other SDGs; the SDR 2019 notes for instance that current conflicts in many parts of the world are leading to reversals in the SDG 16 progress. This is only one of the many interlinkages between the different SDGs that are beginning to be assessed more thoroughly. The Eurostat report 2019 for instance includes a section on synergies and trade-offs between SDGs, and highlights their interconnectedness through the multipurpose indicators.

Reflecting the interlinkages between SDGs 13 and 16, it would seem appropriate to also review the progress made with the latter in the context of and as specifically relevant to climate action.

Access to justice for instance is a fundamental issue in the EU environmental policy landscape, as civil society’s access to justice is an important tool to ensure proper implementation of environmental policies. Although an indicator specific to environmental justice is not available yet, it might be a gap to fill, as more and more court cases are brought on environmental issues like the right to clean air or climate action²⁶. Access to justice is mentioned in the European Environment Agency’s [2019 Environment Implementation Review](#), which assessed that standards set by the [Aarhus Convention](#) have not yet been fully realised across the EU.

Similarly, climate is being [increasingly recognised as a multiplier of threats to peace and security](#) by scientists and political institutions worldwide. Climate change impacts on peace are for instance assessed in the Global Peace Index²⁷ mentioned previously. As extreme events intensify, ‘violence experienced due to a conflict over resources’ might become a relevant indicator on SDG16 for the EU dataset. Finally, as climate change becomes a key issue for Europe and its institutions, actions of these institutions against climate change might significantly influence the trends of indicators on confidence in governments.

The PCD report already moves in that direction. Although no explicit reference to the role of climate in global security is made, it mentions the [Joint communication](#) “A strategic approach to resilience in

²⁴ Specifically ‘Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries’. See [UN website](#)

²⁵ See detailed analysis of Goal 13 in Eurostat (2019)

²⁶ See IEEP (2018) [While Europeans suffer from heat waves, a wave of climate litigation heats up the debate](#)

²⁷ Institute for Economics and Peace (2019)

the EU's external action", which sets out the EU approach to building resilience and includes climate change as a pressure on and threat to security. Encouragingly, the 2019 Joint Synthesis Report explicitly reflects the recent recognition of interlinkages between climate and security, mentioning the EU's integrated approach to external conflicts and crises, which factors in environmental and climate change.

Similarly, progress on reducing inequalities (SDG10), also under review at the July HLPF, could arguably be assessed vis-à-vis its climate dimension.

According to the 2019 Eurostat report, recent advancements in citizens' income and living conditions at national level have resulted in a considerable improvement of EU's progress towards SDG 10 compared with the 2018 report. However, this is true regarding inequalities between countries only; and progress is far from meaning achievement, as there is still a significant gap between Eastern and Western Europe.

When looking at inequalities within countries, all indicators show insufficient progress. This is crucial to consider when looking at SDG 10 through a climate lens, as inequalities within countries are strongly linked to different levels of vulnerability to climate change. For instance, lower income households are more exposed to the impacts of extreme weather events. Conversely, there are trade-offs to consider with SDG 13, as climate mitigation policies such as new energy policies may affect negatively lower-income groups. As a concrete example, the [yellow jacket crisis in France](#) has shown that such interlinkages are necessary to take into account in order to prevent situations where progress towards one SDG results in the opposite for another.

The adoption of an overarching EU strategy would help to break policy silos and thus contribute to the consideration of SDGs interlinkages, reducing the risk of negative trade-offs.

The EU strategic Agenda for 2019-2024, agreed upon at the European Council on 20 June²⁸, states that the EU will 'lead the response to global challenges, by [...] promoting sustainable development and implementing the 2030 Agenda'. However, given the review of progress prior to the UN meetings, it is clear that further concrete commitments and, importantly, more tangible progress is needed to position the EU as the unchallenged global frontrunner in achieving the SDGs.

²⁸ See the [Council conclusions](#), inc. the new strategic agenda.